

Ex-Sergeant Tells of Widespread Surveillance

Army 'Radical Desk': Domestic Spying

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NEW YORK, Dec. 23—For just over a year, Sgt. Ralph Stein had an assignment that he looks back on as strange, seriocomic, scary and perhaps unique in the annals of the United States Army.

Stein was head of the "radical desk" in the Army's counterintelligence analysis branch, and was greeted with a wink as "Mr. New Left" when he came to his office in Alexandria, Va.

The office itself was unusual. It was set up like a newsroom, equipped with wire service tickers and teleprinter that fed data not only to the "radical desk" but to a "right wing desk" and a "racial desk," all of them concerned with purely domestic politics.

Stein says his task was to keep an eye on thousands of



JULIUS HOBSON

... reported among subjects of Army surveillance



SAM BROWN

Americans, ranging from retired rear admirals and pop singers to college clergymen, former Washington school board member Julius Hobson and others

who were deemed "radicals."

Such Washington personalities and organizations as Pride, Inc., Rufus (Catfish) Mayfield, New Mobilization

coordinator Sam Brown and the local Southern Christian Leadership Conference "were kept under constant surveillance by the Army," according to Stein.

Stein said that members of the 116th Army Intelligence group, stationed in Southwest Washington near Ft. McNair, infiltrated the SCLC's Poor People's Campaign, regularly attended meetings of such supposedly "radical" organizations as the New Mobe and the NAACP and made photographs and video tape recordings of participants in Washington demonstrations.

The information, he said, eventually reached his desk in the office of the Assistant Chief of Staff for Intelligence, where Stein says it was placed in "personal or organization dossiers," microfilm data banks and "extensive card files."

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Army 'Radical Desk' — Strange, Scary

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The latter, according to Stein, detailed "political activities and affiliations of individuals and their thoughts and travels."

The former sergeant says he was supposed to collect information on suspected radical individuals and organizations before the newspapers did. He recalls being exhorted by superiors, "Beat the AP, the UPI." His regular work, he said, included briefing generals on the activities of those listed on the index cards and dossiers.

On one occasion he was summoned to CIA headquarters to brief the agency on West Coast underground papers such as the Berkeley (Calif.) Barb. "They seemed to have the idea that the papers were getting money from abroad. I tried to tell them otherwise, and some of the officers didn't like that—I wasn't asked back again."

Stein talked about this and other incidents in interviews today that threw fresh light on the growing controversy over alleged meddling in domestic politics by Army undercover agents. Last week another former sergeant, John M. O'Brien, charged that Army snoopers spied on Sen. Adlai Stevenson III and some 800 other civilians in Illinois.

Asked to comment on Stein's assertions, a Department of the Army spokesman referred to a statement made on Dec. 18 by Army general counsel Robert E. Jordan and said, "It still stands." That statement said:

"I have seen a number of allegations that Army intelligence personnel have in the past gathered information about political figures. The Department of Defense and the Department of the

Army are, of course, gravely concerned about these reports and we are checking into them at this time."

Now 27, Stein joined the Army in October, 1965, attended Army Intelligence School and served in South Korea for 13 months before being assigned—with a "top secret" clearance—to the "radical desk" in July, 1967. He was discharged with the rank of sergeant in October, 1968, and now lives in Flushing, N.Y. He is now a student in the new school for social research.

He says that the Detroit riots of 1967 provided the impetus for setting up the three desks, and that he was told the venture was "a pilot program" to help the Army fulfill its civil disturbance role. His office was originally located in downtown Alexandria, but was later moved to a campus building at the Northern Virginia Community College. The move was prompted, he says, by security fears after an antiwar march on the Pentagon in October, 1967.

At the "radical desk," he asserts, his job was to sift through detailed FBI and Army intelligence reports that piled up daily on his desk, and to be ready to brief superiors on the political activities of thousands of Americans.

Those under surveillance, he says, ranged from known Communists like Gus Hall to antiwar liberals Dr. Benjamin Spock and Yale Chaplain William Sloane Coffin and to entertainers Jane Fonda, Joan Baez and Arlo Guthrie. Also on his lists were Army Brig. Gen. Hugh Hester (ret.), a critic of militarism, and Rear Adm. Arnold E. True (ret.), now a professor of meteorology at San Jose State College, an opponent of the Vietnam war.

Stein asserts that the "racial desk" kept track of everyone from moderates such as Roy Wilkins, director of the NAACP, to black nationalist militants, among them members of the Black United Front of Washington.

The "rightwing desk" was chiefly concerned with activities of the Virginia-based National Socialist White Peoples Party, according to Stein.

Stein says the only elected officials he recalls on his lists was Julian Bond, a black member of the Georgia Legislature, but other public officials, he said, would figure in the files if they spoke at meetings organized by radicals or antiwar liberals.

The three desk officers pooled information in a spirit of competitive camaraderie. But Stein also remembers worried debates about the implications of the operation. He says:

"Several of us were increasingly alarmed, because what we were doing was entirely unconstitutional. We tried to put pressure through channels to close the office, but we couldn't refuse to do the work, because we had no support outside."

"At the time I had no idea what could be done with computers—I now know, and it frightens me to death. There is no computer that cannot be broken into by electronic means. People can tap computerized data banks, you won't even be aware of it."

"And here we were putting into data banks unverified reports on the political and sexual lives of thousands of Americans. I hate to use the term 1984, which sounds hackneyed, but the potential of computers makes 1984 read like a fairy tale."

Stein believes the Army is now trying to halt its domestic surveillance programs and that some of the records are being destroyed. But he fears that officers are lying to their civilian superiors and contends there is no judicial restraint against counterintelligence.

On Monday, Stein is due to be an expert witness at the pretrial hearing of a suit brought in Chicago by the American Civil Liberties Union seeking a federal court order barring Army snooping and requiring the destruction of all past records.

Stein recalls receiving undercover reports on campus politics in New York City from the 108th Military Intelligence Group based here.

A former officer assigned to the group, Joseph Levin, charged yesterday that Army agents have spied on student activities at major New York universities.

Levin, now an attorney in Montgomery, Ala., served as a first lieutenant in the unit from July, 1967. He said reports were even compiled on a demonstration of welfare mothers in front of city hall.

Levin said he himself had been ordered to monitor student activities at Fordham University, while Columbia was also under the unit's eyes. spokesmen for all four colleges have denied all knowledge of Army surveillance.

Col. David Miller, commanding officer of the 108th group, denied that the Army is snooping on students, asserting that the basic mission of his unit is to carry out security investigations of persons applying for "sensitive" posts. But Miller, who assumed his present command a month ago, said he could not speak about the past.